

[Life and Folkways of the Old Aurora Colony]

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Beliefs and customs - general Sketches

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Title Life and folkways of the old Aurora

colony

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Place or origin Portland, Oregon Date 5/15/39

Project worker Howard M. Corning

Project editor

Remarks

Form A

Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Howard M. Corning Date May 10 & 15, 1939

Address 407 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Life and Folkways of the Old Aurora Colony

Name and address of informant Elias (Eli) Keil

Aurora, Oregon

Date and time of interview May 9, 2 P. M.; May 12, 1:30 P.M.

Place of interview In side yard of home place.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

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Mrs. Arthur Kraus, wife of the town's most prominent grocer.

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

The large old frame house in which Eli Keil lives is perhaps the most distinctive architecturally of those now standing in Aurora. It faces east, toward the town, is quite tall and has a great-pillared front porch, with upper and lower levels, covering the entire face of the building. It was built in the middle 1860's, from lumber cut at the local mill, long since burned down. The house measures probably 55 feet across the front, which is its longest dimension, for it is only about 30 feet deep, front to back. A chimney towers at the north end. A glimpse through the front windows shows that some partitions have been thrown in, dividing rooms that once were large, particularly the main living room. The fireplace does not appear impressive. 2 Although the house sets well back from the highway, on a slight rise, it now has little frontyard; a strip about 20 feet deep runs before the house. Between that and the road is a garden patch, at the front south corner of the tall structure stands the most massive cherry tree I have ever seen, itself a landmark, possibly as old as the house. It throws a dense shade. Shrubbery grows mildly in the north yard. Other fruit trees stand about the home premises. A constant stream of water flows from beneath the small water tower at the back, pumped there by the water ran at the foot of the slope to the south, Sheds and barns are spaced about the sprawling irregular area.

The whole place is in general and sad disrepair and neglect. The owner's sole interest in life seems to be in caring for his cultivated acreage, berries, young orchard, and wheat lands, lying to the north and west. These fields climb the slope to the old Keil burial plot where the owner's parents and grandparents, the founders of the town, lie buried.

Form B

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Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Howard M. Corning Date May 10, 1939

Address 407 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon.

Subject Life and Folkways of the Old Aurora Colony

Name and address of informant Elias Keil, Aurora, Oregon.

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family
4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities

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9. Description of informant

10. Other points gained in interview

1. Father, Frederick Keil, German parentage.
2. Aurora, Oregon, 1875.
3. Wife (deceased some years); has five children, all married, all living.
4. Always lived at Aurora.
5. Educated in local colony schools only.
6. Farming.
7. Musician. Pianist of some ability once but no longer plays. Played violin at one time also.
8. Was a very young boy when Colony life was discontinued. Gradually lost interest in religious activities although father once studied for ministry. Took some part in community activities while wife lived, but not recently.
9. Is of spare, wiry build, about five feet ten inches tall. He is smart, his skin is deeply tanned and he wears a stubbly beard that suggests that he shaves periodically only. The beard is mixed gray and black. His hair is nearly white and slightly curly. The grime worked into his pores is only one evidence of the thoroughness with which he has harmonized his life with his environment. His movements are unhurried but decisive, at times even agile.
10. His life charts the passing of a tradition.

Form C

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Text of Interview (Unedited)

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OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Howard M. Corning Date May 10, 1939

Address 407 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Life and Folkways of the Old Aurora Colony

Name and address of informant Elias Keil, Aurora, Oregon

Text: (First interview)

No, this wasn't the old William Keil house; my father built this some time in the 60's. Yes, my father was Frederick Keil, one of William's sons. The lumber was all cut down at the mill on the millrace. That was the second mill. The first mill was a small up-and-down one, it stood right down on Mill Creek. Sometimes when there was high water, in the winter or the spring, the first mill would be flooded so they couldn't work it. But that didn't happen very often. There were a few times, I guess, when the water was too low for the saw to operate. So they built the new mill. They built a dam back up over there to the south about a half mile, and dug a mill-race from it down to the creek. That gave them plenty of water force. The new mill set up too high to be under high water. Oh we had some high water in the spring. You could take a rowboat from right in front of the house here and boat clear over to the other side of town. That was nothing. We did it lots of times. Water stood all over the low parts. But that never happens now.

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Those spokes in the banisters of the porch, you mean? They were turned out down at the mill, just like the main pillars of the church were. They had a turning lathe. It was run by a horse walking around in a circle. So were the 2 porch pillars. They did some good work then.

The big mill “burned off” one night, some years ago.

That half-moon window in the side of the barn there? That's only one of them; there's another on the south side. They were from the old Colony church, when it was torn down. The two of them were over the front doors.

No, I don't seem to remember many of the old stories. There were things happened, of course. We had some visitors. The old stage route from Portland to Salem ran through here. There was where one of the old hotels stood — see that excavation over there? (He pointed several hundred yards to the south). A lot of travelers stayed there? A good many more stopped in town after the railroad came through (1873).

Things were lively during the time they were building the railroad. Most of the work was done by the Irish — red-bearded Irish. They were a noisy bunch, always getting drunk, Saturday nights, especially. I remember once there was one got pretty drunk and started yelling “There ain't no Dutchman can lick me.” Well, we had a teamster in town, a great big fellow. He stood this Irishman's bragging for a while, then he went up to him and said, “See here, you better quit yellin' so loud; somebody might hear you.” But this Irish fellow kept on; “I'd like to see the Dutchman can lick the Irish.” Well, this teamster — Schaefer was his name — he grabbed this red-bearded fellow around the shoulders like he was wrestling with him, and laid him down on the mill platform, where they were standing. Schaefer wasn't mad; just telling him to quiet down. That fellow just turned his head to one side and sunk his teeth into Schaefer's arm. Right here in the muscle of the upper part. That made Schaefer mad. He just picked that Irishman up and threw him out into the millrace. That quieted him down. He floundered out and never said another word. There were a lot of

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people saw it happen and everybody laughed. I'll never forget that . . . Oh, I don't think of many stories like that.

3

About the work gangs on the railroad: The Chinamen came in next; there were quite a lot of them for awhile. After that there were a lot of Japs. No, not many Italians, but Greeks. Only Americans work on the tracks now.

In the early years the wagon roads were kept up by the people owning property. In the spring the men all got out and worked the roads.

But I missed most of the Colony life; I was five years old when it broke up. I do remember the fine music we had; two of the best bands in Oregon. My father belonged to one. He always said old John Ehlen was as good a musician as Finck (Henry Conrad Finch). He may not have been any better but he was just as good. We had festivals and picnics up in the park, and the band would play. To get there you go up the gravel road to the house on the hill, then turn west. The park's pretty much grown up now.

No, there were only three bells in the old church; not five. One was exhibited at Portland a few years ago and is somewhere down town; I don't know where it's stored now. It hung in the fire hall until they bought the siren. One of them is up here in the school-house. The other hangs in a church at Sherwood, I believe.

You can photograph this house if you want to. Some people came out from the Historical Society some years ago and measured it and everything. I live here alone now, in this (south) side of the house. I had a family living in part of it for awhile. But now people seem to like to live by themselves. In the old Colony days there were several families to a house.

Yes, that's a water ram. It pumps half a gallon every minute. It's a spring stream; comes from back up the ravine a short ways. It's good water. Sure, it pumps clear up here. [md]

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(Text of second interview; obtained in lower field which the informant and a second man were plowing with a tractor and a walking plow).

See, I intend to irrigate this piece down here. Most every other year there 4 has been enough overflow water from the tank above to keep it moist. But not this year. I'll do some troughing and run some ditches around and keep it watered. Yes, the water-ram will pump it around.

Any more stories? Well, I don't know. Yes, I remember way back when Aurora had an old soldiers' lodge. All the old soldiers belonged to it; you know, there were American soldiers and some who had fought in foreign wars. All of them were together. They would all get together on Decoration Day and on the Fourth of July. One of them was my uncle (great uncle); he was the brother of my grandfather (Dr. William Keil, founder of the colony). Oh, I think he came about the same time in 1855, when the first settlers came across the country. He fought in the war against Napoleon. Let's see, when was that? About 1812. That would make him 15 or 20 years older than his brother, I guess that was right.

Well, you know, they were all up at the park for the celebration one Fourth of July; all these old soldiers, you know. And you know, my uncle was there and he'd been drinking. He'd got just enough to talk big and strut around. He was all dressed up, you know; had on his uniform and sabre and everything. Well, they were all talking, and my uncle he pulled out his sword and thrust it in the ground in front of him, exclaiming "Well I fought Napoleon. I was in the wars and I fought Napoleon." Well, he had his sword out and he wasn't very sober, so the rest of the old fellows took hold of his arms, you know, and patted him on the back, and said, "Yes, Henry, you fought Napoleon." He put his sword back then.

Yes, I used to play the piano. I still have it up at the house. But they don't play the good music now. They play "The Firefly" and "The Bumblebee", and they're good. But Bennett wrote some pieces were just as good, but they don't play him any now. I don't know why. The radio play plays mostly noise.

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Form D

Extra Comment

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OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Howard E. Corning Date May 10, 1939

Address 407 Elks Building, Portland, Oregon

Subject Life and Folkways of the Old Aurora Colony

Name and address of informant Elias Keil, Aurora Oregon

Comment: The informant talked with thoughtful composure, carefully, with little sense of drama but also with little carelessness of speech. He seems well content with life, making few demands of it. We stood in the sunny south yard, where he pointed out the landmarks and sites of a vanished life. To the south and east the scattered structures of the village, many of them painted white, as many more deeply weathered, sprawl in the bottomlands of the creek and of Pudding River, and climb the surrounding slopes. Much of the acreage about is cleared and cultivated, or lying fallow. There are scattered clumps of woodland. In this excessively dry spring the farmers are wondering if they will have any crops at all to show for their early-season diligence. The informant came back to this contingency several times as we talked. But his wants are few and with only himself to look out for, he cannot expect to suffer greatly from a lean year. As we talked a passenger train passed through the town, the track nearly a half-mile from the Keil house; yet the engine's whistle blasted against the hills with such force that the interviewer, who was speaking at the moment,

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had to leave his sentence temporarily unfinished. The informant referred me to William Kraus, living nearby, and to his sister, Mrs. Ehlen, at Canby.